

Immersion Journalism and Insights on Intimate Partner Terrorism

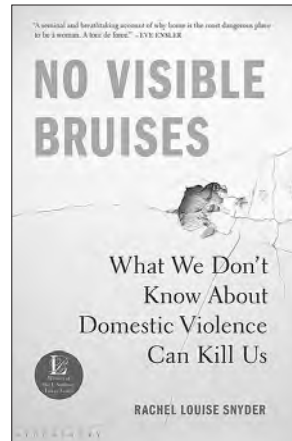
No Visible Bruises: What We Don't Know about Domestic Violence Can Kill Us by Rachel Louise Snyder. London: Bloomsbury, 2019. Hardcover, 309 pp., USD\$28.

Reviewed by Barbara Selvin, Stony Brook University, United States

The eight years Rachel Louise Snyder spent reporting on intimate partner violence have produced a work of devastating personal histories and hard-won insight, told in lyrical language. Hard-won: The time Snyder spent with frightened women, grieving families, remorseful batterers, police officers, researchers, and advocates left her so drained emotionally that at one point she stopped to regain her equilibrium. “There was a period of time when it took a force of will for me to not look at every man I met as a possible abuser and every woman as a possible victim,” she writes. “This is not the way one wants to walk through life. I knew that. I know that. . . . I took an entire year off from anything having to do with violence. I worked out, and I read, and I painted, and I went to therapy, and I avoided abuse and homicide and police reports” (98).

Snyder’s book is not one immersive account, but several. She probes domestic violence (or intimate partner terrorism, a phrase she finds more accurate but less widely used and thus less useful) from many perspectives, offering a dozen or more detailed portraits drawn from the hours, days, or months she spent with her sources. Its value as literary journalism emerges, too, from the beauty, passion, and skill of her writing—Snyder’s chapter kickers alone are worthy of study for how to propel readers through a book-length reporting project—and from her reflections on the impact of the reporting on herself.

These profiles and perspectives offer models of how to conduct and synthesize sensitive in-depth interviews. They also elucidate the complexity of domestic violence, showing that abuse has no single cause but is a product of multiple influences: economics, education, or the lack of it, abusers’ clinical narcissism, a “male role belief system” that teaches men to nurture anger rather than empathy; and a profound failure of agencies and institutions, from police to the courts to social services, to share their information in a way that would protect women at risk. The layered stories build Snyder’s argument that better communication among the many institutions that intersect with victims is critical to preventing domestic abuse and, chillingly, intimate partner homicides and familicides.



For what became the first part of the book (called “The End”), Snyder made repeated trips to Billings, Montana, to report the death and life of Michelle Monson Mosure, whose husband killed her, their two children, and himself in 1993. Snyder uses Michelle’s story to explore the confounding question of why victims stay with their abusers. For Snyder, this is the wrong question. One of her insights is that, often, victims recant accusations of abuse and return to their partners because they don’t think they—or they and their children—would be safer outside the home; they fear their abusers could find them, or they fear that in leaving they would be isolated from friends, family, jobs, and other support, or they are trying, cautiously, to lay the groundwork for an eventual departure. “[W]e don’t know what we’re seeing,” she writes; “the question of leaving versus staying disregards the cavalcade of forces at work in an abusive relationship” (16).

Look at Michelle Monson Mosure. Look at any intimate partner homicide anywhere in any given year and it will be the same: she tried every which way she could. She tried and tried, but the equation, or rather, the question, isn’t a matter of leaving or staying. It’s a matter of living or dying.

They stay because they choose to live.

And they die anyway.

Michelle Mosure stayed for her kids and for herself. She stayed for pride and she stayed for love and she stayed for fear and she stayed for cultural and social forces far beyond her control. And her staying, to anyone trained enough to see the context, looked a lot less like staying and a lot more like someone tiptoeing her way toward freedom (73).

Other sections of the book portray abusive men seeking transformation and the “changemakers” (16) whose work is saving lives across the United States. Insights emerge: that abusers rarely use women’s names, omitting not just their victims’ names but also their mothers’ and sisters’; “bitch” is the usual substitute. That batterers may need multiple attempts to complete intervention programs before succeeding, just as addicts or gamblers do. That mass shootings often have roots in domestic violence: Adam Lanza prefaced his massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School by shooting his mother, as did Charles Whitman (along with his wife) the day before he killed sixteen people at the University of Texas at Austin in 1966. Snyder shows how small changes from responders can save lives: a laminated order of protection stays legible longer than a paper one; a bag of diapers and some grocery money can give a victim the caesura that enables her to make better long-term decisions for herself and her children. The data Snyder gathers refute common assumptions, proving that despite the constraints of privacy regulations, agencies can work together, can share enough information, such as the existence of prior restraining orders or a history of threats or arrests, to engender effective protective measures.

Snyder approaches one of her conclusions almost gingerly: that the manifest availability of guns in the United States vastly increases the likelihood of domestic abuse becoming domestic homicide. She broaches the subject in describing a two-day meeting of Montana’s Domestic Violence Fatality Review Commission, then barely mentions it again for several chapters until she summarizes the ride-alongs she

conducted with local police in each jurisdiction she visited for reporting. Every cop, she recalls, said he or she wished civilians had fewer guns, and Snyder spends four pages exploring the intersection of gun safety and domestic violence. Perhaps she uses a light touch because the issue of gun control can be so toxic in U.S. culture; perhaps she wants to avoid certain readers rejecting all of her work because they reject her conclusions on gun access. Though understated, her position is clear. And sometimes, as here, an insight quietly uttered comes through with unmistakable clarity.